

Wildlife conservation in Australia State of a Nation

Tim Moore, MP

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Professor Recher raises a number of broad policy issues which go beyond immediate and instinctive governmental policy reaction and options for legislation, for example, for species conservation, land management or habitat protection. The most significant "future investment" issues raised are in the area of research and education.

The New South Wales Government believes there is a clear need to make commitments that go beyond the life span of single parliaments or governments in this regard.

In the New South Wales school education system, a K-12 environmental education curriculum has been introduced.

At the same time, the State Government has introduced legislation to establish three Environmental Trust Funds.

The purpose of this legislation to create the:

Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Trust;
Environmental Research Trust;
Environmental Education Trust

is to build a substantial long-term capital base for community investment in environmental projects that would not otherwise be met from normal government funding at a Commonwealth, State or Local Government level. These are truly "community" Trusts. Their Trustees will act to ensure that grants made are for purposes that would not, in the day to day activities of any government, be addressed as part of an ordinary works or funding programme.

To make this possible, the "polluters" who pay industrial discharge fees under the Sydney Water Board's Trade Waste Regulations will provide, by direct charges on their disposal to the sewerage system of industrial substances, the capital sums for the establishment and continuing accrual of the "capital base" of these Trusts.

The Greiner Government believes that, as a classically appropriate example of "polluter pays", industry should provide a basis for cleaning-up the problems of the past as well as for education and research to guarantee a better record for future generations.

Payments to these Trusts are not intended to be "conscience money" for the government or the community

as a trade-off for sanctioning further environmentally-damaging activities at a reduced level. It is expected that the trade waste charges which provide the source of funds for the Trusts will increase at approximately 15% per annum — significantly higher than any projected rates of inflation. The philosophic basis for doing this is to use the pricing mechanism as a combination of economic and regulatory measures — as well as increasingly more severe discharge standards — to ensure that the discharge volume of industrial waste products is constantly driven downward.

The Environmental Restoration and Rehabilitation Trust will be the largest of the three Trusts and it is into this Trust that 70% of the capital accrual will be paid. In the first grants cycle, payments of up to \$1.25 million may be made from this fund depending on interest earnings and the like. Two key programmes are envisaged to be met from this fund.

First, an immediate "underwriting fund" is to be established to enable Local and State Government emergency intervention to be funded, in responding to and cleaning up spills, of environmentally damaging or hazardous substances.

Second, this Trust will be expected to fund broader community based restoration or rehabilitation projects.

We strongly believe that there is a genuine and legitimate role for a State Government funding of serendipitous research of a "high risk and high potential" nature in the environmental field. This research in the physical, chemical or biological sciences could underpin major technological advancements in the treatment or elimination of sources of past or future pollution. Opportunities should also exist through this Trust for natural environmental research into subjects such as species endangerment.

Long-term environmental education is also essential to ensure that we can achieve behavioural modification and teach the community, generally, through all age groups, that there is a necessity to ensure that each of us, as individual residents of this planet, have a responsibility to ensure that our impact on the ecosystem in which we live is as low as possible. The education aspects of government policy include an emphasis on accepting this responsibility as a significant aspect of a government environmental programme.

On the other hand, acceptance of (and education for) the assumption of individual responsibility is not an excuse for a government seeking to exculpate itself from proper public sector responsibilities. More, it is an acknowledgement that each individual can play an incremental part in environmental improvement if we each adopt the thematic approach of "thinking globally and acting locally".

The boundaries drawn by the nation's colonial rulers which delineate our political administrative units do not, for the main part, follow logical ecosystem boundaries. Stress and damage to such ecosystems, as a logical consequence, also do not follow such artificial boundaries.

Spheres of influence between the different levels of government and the nature of their administrative

arrangements are not recognized by the natural forces which shape, mold or degrade our natural environment. Human modification, whether intentional or otherwise, of this environment also is not bound by such constraints.

The New South Wales Government recognizes that we live in a society which has had significant impact locally, nationally and globally on our range of ecosystems. Much more needs to be done in the future on a co-operative Federal basis to address these problems and blind chauvinist parochialism cannot be allowed to act as an inhibitor on responsible and appropriate national or global measures to address these degradations or human impacts.

Improving the scientific component of conservation planning

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In his paper in the March 1990 edition of *Australian Zoologist*, Harry Recher reviews the status of wildlife conservation in Australia and considers the options available for restoration of degraded landscapes and prevention of further species extinctions. He argues for a review of Australia's national goals and the redefinition of the measurement of progress and the quality of life.

The sustainable development debate currently underway in Canberra is part of the process outlined in Dr Recher's article. The urgent need is for a full contribution by scientists. Descriptions of the environmental problem are getting through to the wider community, probably to saturation point. Doomsday statements now have to lead to informed debate, and as Dr Recher says the setting of goals, where we want to go and how to get there.

The development of the National Conservation Strategy for Australia in 1983 was an earlier stage in this process. More recently the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon. John Kerin, MP, announced the initiative to define and develop a programme for sustainable development (see press releases, for example, 2 May, 1990). In another release on 8 February, 1990, he outlined his top seven issues for agriculture in the 1990's. They were identifying the barriers to farmers adopting environmentally sound technologies and practices that are also economically viable; determining targets, if any, for repairing land degradation; introducing

market mechanisms, regulations, and education services to encourage sustainability; deciding if stocking rates are excessive in some areas, and if some lands are "marginal"; drought and the recommendations of the Drought Review Policy Task Force; determining the role of land and water regulations and administrative arrangements in problem solution; and deciding if reforms to chemical use including recent Commonwealth legislation, have brought us up to where we should be.

Concurrently, the Commission for the Future has released a discussion paper which emphasized the need for integrating ecology and the economy.

Dr Recher alludes to people who have fixed views about parks and wildlife conservation. He suggests, rather timidly, that the concept of multiple use parks "merits consideration". The objections by some conservationists to utilization of native species needs similar treatment. If we are going to have a meaningful debate and come to mutually agreed goals on wildlife conservation and sustainable development then many sacred cows on both sides have to go. On the development side there is unthinking philosophical resistance to scrutinizing continuous economic growth, yet most know that exponential increases in resource consumption are no more feasible than unrestrained increases in human population. Dr Recher identifies these problems and the needs for a change in the national and state policies based on a growth economy and the assumption of an expanding population.